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**MASTERS OF OPERATIONAL STUDIES**

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***THE WARFIGHTER'S APPLICATION OF  
SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY IN FUTURE CONFLICT***

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*“...though weapons and tactics have changed continually in step with technological progress, the basic controlling element in war—man—has remained relatively constant.”<sup>1</sup>*

- Vincent J. Esposito

While the nature of war remains constant, the character of war is continuously changing in step with technological progress and political desires.<sup>2</sup> The debate on the character of future warfare often times becomes mired as groups tend to categorize warfare by the type of the tactics that the belligerents use. Will the conflict of tomorrow be a conventional style of warfare between regional hegemons or will distributed forces be needed to conduct full spectrum operations against dispersed adversaries that operate from complex political and physical terrain? While the character of future warfare is important in order to properly man, train and equip tomorrow's armed forces to conduct operations within this wide spectrum of human interaction, predictions on the character of future war will only be as valid as the accuracy of the predictions of future technology and political will. This paper will argue that the key to successfully preparing for future warfare is not in accurately predicting the changing character of warfare, but it is in understanding how to resolve the conflicts that have and always will exist between the human wills.

In analyzing this premise, one assumption will be made. That assumption is that the desire of the United States government is to conclude conflict with the peaceful resumption of politics. Using this assumption, this paper will start with an introduction to the current theories of conflict resolution within the science of social psychology. Then an examination will be made to compare the current United States Marine Corps methodology and mindset towards conflict resolution. From this analysis, this paper will propose that the Marine Corps doctrinal mindset that “the object of war is to impose our will on our enemy” is detrimental to the goal of returning

an escalated situation to a peaceful end state. Instead of “imposing our will,” the Marine Corps’ doctrinal mindset should be adjusted so that “the object of war is to de-escalate the conflict and reestablish the political process in order that political objectives are obtained.”<sup>3</sup> By changing the mindset of the warfighter, Marines will be much better prepared to take a situation of conflict and shape their efforts towards obtaining resolution rather than unwittingly forcing belligerents into entrenched hostility.

Social psychology is the intellectual field researching the group processes involved with conflict resolution amongst social groups. Conflict, as Sigmund Freud said, is an inevitable byproduct of civilization because the goals and needs of individuals often clash with the goals and needs of their fellow human beings.<sup>4</sup> This situation of conflict, in which a self-interested choice by anyone or everyone creates the worst outcome for everyone, is known as a social dilemma. There are three types of social dilemmas that describe the motivations between different social groups: two-party prisoner’s dilemmas, n-party prisoner’s dilemmas, and resource dilemmas.

Prisoner’s dilemmas, both two-party and n-party, involve various versions of a mixed-motive problem. A mixed motive problem comes from the requirement of one group to make a competitive or a cooperative decision in relation to another group. A competitive decision is one that is best for the individual group. However, in a mixed motive problem, if both groups choose the competitive decision, then they will be worse off than if they both cooperated. An example of a mixed motive problem is a Marine in combat. The individual is personally motivated to take cover and not expose himself to hostile fire. But, if the individual Marine and all the Marines in his platoon make the same decision, the enemy would be able to maneuver, fire and defeat the entire platoon.

The other type of social dilemma, a resource dilemma, describes the motives for multiple social groups competing or sharing a common but limited resource. One type of resource dilemma, the commons dilemma, describes the motivations of groups faced with a limited resource that cannot be replenished. If a group takes as much as it wants, nothing will be left for everyone. An example of this is any variety of historical examples where factions came into conflict over limited natural resource like oil, food, or water. The other type of resource dilemma is called the public goods dilemma. In this situation, the individual groups are supposed to contribute their own limited resources towards a common goal. If one or more groups do not contribute, the entire collection of groups will fail. Examples of conflicts over this type of dilemma are disputes between factions within a government over taxes, distribution of political power, or resource requirements to make infrastructure improvements.

With a description of the nature of social dilemmas, there are many issues that social psychologists identify in understanding the ways in which groups attempt to resolve these social dilemmas. It is understood that many of these dilemmas can be resolved peacefully, but the Marine Corps exists because an escalation to warfare is a common option for social groups in conflict. Some of these social dilemma issues which are important to understand in order to prevent the escalation of a conflict and to compare to the Marine warfighting mindset are the psychological factors involved with solving social dilemmas, the Tit-for-tat strategy, the use of threats, the effects of communication and the use of negotiation.

One of the primary psychological factors concerning social dilemmas is the culture of the participant groups. Studies examining the cultural effects on social dilemmas have illuminated significant differences between the reactions of individualist cultures compared to collective cultures. An example of such a study is one that has shown that groups from the United States, a

predominately individualist culture, tend to compete more and cooperate less than groups from Vietnam, a collectivist culture.<sup>5</sup> Another psychological factor influencing social dilemmas is group behavior. Typically, groups are more competitive and less cooperative than individuals. This is because group members do not identify with particular individuals of another group and feel much less identifiable by members of the other group thereby resulting in a lower overall trust level. This social-dynamic results in a greater fear of exploitation and a greater desire to maximize the outcomes of one's own group at the other group's expense.<sup>6</sup> The size of the group also affects response to social dilemmas. Large groups are more likely than small groups to be competitive in nature and to exploit resources.<sup>7</sup>

The tit-for-tat strategy is a reciprocal strategy often used to increase cooperation. This is done in order to deter conflict escalation but often has an undesired and detrimental reverse consequence. The tit-for-tat strategy encourages cooperation by first cooperating with the opposing group and subsequently responding to the opponent's actions by mirroring the actions of your opponent. An example of this strategy would be in an initiation of a cease-fire between two belligerents. While studies have shown that if a tit-for-tat strategy is successful, a higher level of cooperation will exist between groups,<sup>8</sup> studies have also shown that once a competitive gesture is made, the opponent most likely will be provoked to respond with a competitive gesture.<sup>9</sup> To continue the previous example, if during a cease fire one side violates the mutually agreed upon cease fire, the opponent will most likely retaliate in kind, which in turn will be responded to with violence. The end result is that the failure of a tit-for-tat strategy will likely lead to an increase in escalation compared to the original situation.

The next social dilemma issue, the use of "threats of violence," is a tool which many social groups, like the Marine Corps, use as a way to impose their will on another group.<sup>10</sup> The



threat of violence to punish a group that engages in prohibited behavior is part of modern social interaction. However a study by Morton Deutsch and Robert Krauss indicated that threats are not an effective means of reducing conflict. In the study, when a group had a coercive means available, they used it. This premature use of threat capacity resulted in aggressive retaliation by the other group resulting in an escalation of the conflict and a detrimental outcome to both participants.<sup>11</sup>

Communication is another issue that social psychologists identify in understanding the ways in which groups attempt to resolve social dilemmas. A common belief is that if a simple dialogue is opened between belligerents an equitable solution can be found. However, in situations that Marines often find themselves in, the conflict has escalated to a point to where communication is not useful and can often be detrimental. Studies have shown that in no threat conditions or when there is a bi-lateral threat present, forcing groups to communicate did not increase cooperation.<sup>12</sup> Communication has been proven to only be useful when social groups learn how to use communication to establish trust.<sup>13</sup>

Negotiation is a form of communication between opposing groups in a conflict in which offers and counteroffers are made and a solution occurs only when both parties agree. One restriction to a successful negotiation, and one that is likely to affect Marines abiding by their warfighting doctrine, is that groups involved in a negotiation often assume that they are locked in a conflict in which only one party can come out ahead. Also affecting the probability of a successful negotiation is that the more a group has at stake in a negotiation, for example the safety of their Marines, the more biased their perceptions of their opponent. This biased group will tend to distrust proposals made by the other side and will overlook common interests both parties have which might provide a foundation for a successful negotiation.<sup>14</sup> The goal of a

negotiation strategy is to find a compromise to the conflict whereby the parties make trade-offs on issues according to their different interests. Each side will communicate their vital interests and then each side concedes the most on issues that are unimportant to it but important to the other side.

Within the previous discussion, several assertions have been made referencing the Marine Corps' competitive mindset. The following discussion is an attempt to validate this assertion. The Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (MCDP 1) is the United States Marine Corps' keystone doctrinal publication. It essentially states in a very Clausewitzian tradition that conflict resolution is a competition of wills. While not identifying military operations specifically as efforts to resolve conflict between multiple social groups, a look at several chapters within the manual will illustrate the point.

In chapter one, titled "The Nature Of War", the manual begins by stating that a cohesive doctrine for warfighting is based on a common view of what the essence of war is. The manual states that "the essence of war is a violent clash between two hostile, independent and irreconcilable wills, each trying to impose itself on the other."<sup>15</sup> And in the very next paragraph, the manual makes the conclusion that "the object of war is to impose our will on our enemy" with the application or threat of violence being the instrument to obtain the desired objective.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, just from the beginning chapter in MCDP 1, it is not difficult to make the deduction that in the Marine Corps' ethos, war is a competition of wills between two social and political entities.

To provide further examples of this competition mindset, in a section on training Marines for war, the manual states "the purpose of all training is to develop forces that can win in combat."<sup>17</sup> Further on in the manual, in a section dedicated to developing the intent of a

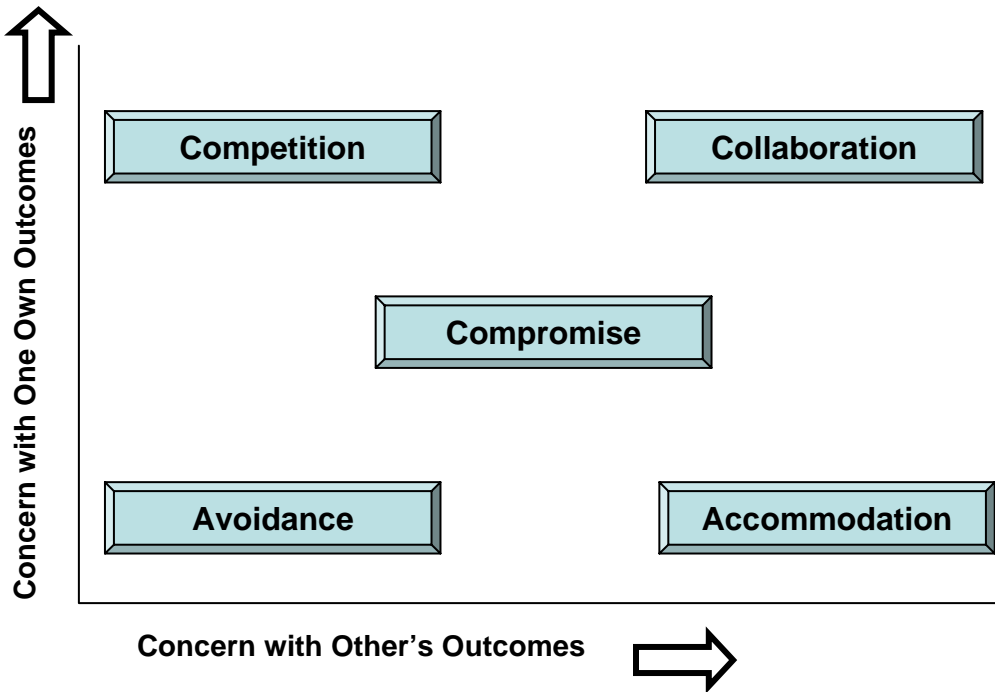
successful commander, the manual makes the statement that “to win is always our ultimate goal.”<sup>18</sup> This mindset, that war is a competition of wills, leads to a competitive environment where Marines can easily assume that they are locked into a conflict in which only one side can come out ahead. Unarguably, as is shown by the successful history of the Marine Corps, this competitive and aggressive mindset is a very essential ingredient in cultivating a warrior culture that is successful in kinetic operations.

In light of the previous discussions on the current theories within the military and social psychology, this paper will now make an effort to improve the Marine Corps doctrinal mindset that “the object of war is to impose our will on our enemy”. In order to do this, a model will be introduced which describes how groups react to conflict. This model will help identify the situation facing Marines as they enter a conflict situation so that they can appreciate the requirements for a successful campaign. Then, this paper will investigate the two principal parts of conflict resolution: de-escalation and efforts to overcome divergence of interest.

According to research done by Baron and Byrne, most groups react to conflict in one of five patterns:

- *competition*-get as much as possible for oneself or one’s group;
- *compromise*-split everything down the middle or equally;
- *accommodation*-give up and let the others take all the benefits;
- *avoidance*-avoid conflict in any way possible, including withdrawal from the situation;
- *collaboration*-attempt to maximize everyone’s gains.<sup>19</sup>

Each of these patterns arises as a result of two distinct factors which are inherent to the individual group concerned. The two factors are the concern for one’s own outcomes and the concern for other’s outcomes. (See Figure 1)<sup>20</sup>



(Figure 1)

Competition is a group's reaction when their concern for their own outcome is high and their concern for other's outcome is low. Accommodation or surrender on the other hand occurs when a groups concern for other's outcome is high and their concern for their own outcome is low. Compromise, avoidance and collaboration are all variations of the factors as shown in figure (1). Therefore, when faced with the task of resolving conflict, determining which strategy will be the best to use will be dependant on the very nature of situation and which pattern each group tends to adopt when faced with conflict. As far as Marines are concerned, the very nature of a military force intervention means that the two political groups have most likely escalated to competitive pattern of behavior.

Conflict resolution is a term used to describe the reversal of the conflict process and is expressed by two parts, de-escalation and efforts to overcome divergence of interest.<sup>21</sup> De-escalation occurs when both parties have a desire to terminate the conflict. According to theorists, the desire to terminate the conflict can come from three different situations. The first

situation is called a “hurting stalemate” in which both sides of the conflict feel that they are suffering unacceptable costs in a conflict that cannot be won. The second situation is defined by both parties desiring to end a conflict because of a recent or impending calamity, such as a war, which is a result of the conflict. And the third situation that causes de-escalation is called an “enticing opportunity”. This occurs when parties felt that there is something to be gained from collaborating with the other party.<sup>22</sup>

In creating the conditions to encourage de-escalation, most traditional thought is built around the idea that contact and communication will improve inter-group behavior. However, studies have shown that in severe conflict situations, such as those faced by intervening military forces, introducing opposing sides to contact and communication is often more detrimental than it is productive. This is because contact and communication allows the belligerents to threaten and provoke each other resulting in even greater confrontations.<sup>23</sup> The most successful strategy in a highly escalated conflict is to get both sides to cooperate on a subordinate goal. Subordinate goals are mutual objectives which require the belligerent groups to cooperate but whose goals and issues are external to the existing conflict. This cooperative activity outside the sphere of the current conflict helps to build trust but it must be pointed out, a failure to obtain the subordinate goal often results in a greater level of distrust and further entrenchment of the conflict.

Another method that can serve to de-escalate a conflict is conciliatory initiatives. Conciliatory initiatives are extremely effective when there is a strong element of distrust between the two parties. Proven techniques that increase the chances of a successful de-escalation are to choose a conciliatory initiative that is costly to oneself thereby demonstrating that the initiative is not just a cheap trick. Also, announce your intentions ahead of time and then carry out the initiative as announced.<sup>24</sup> In addition, it has been suggested that conciliatory initiatives should

be: noticeable and unexpected, so that they will provoke thought;<sup>25</sup> non-contingent and irrevocable, so that they will be understood as efforts to resolve the conflict rather than to gain a quid pro quo;<sup>26</sup> and continued for a while, so as to give the other side time to rethink its policies.<sup>27</sup>

Efforts to overcome divergence of interest include negotiation and third-party intervention. Negotiation is not always successful or feasible especially in an environment where military intervention has occurred due to the level of escalation that has occurred. This is because the belligerents have often become too hostile and untrusting of each other to reach an agreement on their own. When this occurs, third-party groups often intervene with the objective to de-escalate the conflict and bring the parties towards cooperation. Examples of third party intervention are mediation, arbitration, and peacekeeping. The theory behind the third-party intervention is that the more escalated the conflict is, the more forceful the third-party will need to be to de-escalate the conflict. A situation where the conflict has not escalated beyond the point where groups are capable of discussion, mediation is the appropriate strategy. If severe levels of hostility between groups have evolved as each side has begun to polarize on issues, the third-party will need to begin arbitration. Situations with extreme levels of escalation, in which parties have developed the goal of destroying each other, peacekeeping will be required before other forms of intervention are employed. The Marine Corps' in its Small Wars Manual provides an extremely good discussion of third-party intervention strategy and psychology.<sup>28</sup>

With all of the previous writing as a basis for further discussion, what can Marines do to properly engage in future war? This paper proposes that the answer is in how Marines design their campaigns. In today' warfighting environment, the Marine Corps can enter into any variety of points within the spectrum of conflict from peacekeeping to irregular warfare to full-scale

conventional conflict. The commonality of all of these situations is that the conflict deals with social group, and that the Marine Corps is there to obtain some political objective for the United States. However, when the Marine Corps enters into a theater, the natural use of the Marine's warfighting competitive ethos will tend to drive a strategy which tries to obtain the political objectives by eliminating the opposing group or by pressuring the opposing will to "avoid/withdrawal" from the conflict. The individualist and competitive nature of the American culture will naturally drive Marines to develop strategies that try to accomplish this goal by including the use of violence, the threat of violence, or a tit-for-tat or "proportional response" strategy.

In all of these strategies, the campaign design and goal focus's around terminating the conflict by the suppression of the opponent's will to continue. But taking into account the research of social dilemmas, the only way to permanently suppress the opponent's will is to completely eliminate the opposing belligerent. As has been demonstrated in the American War for Independence, the Napoleon's Peninsular campaign, Algeria and possibly today in Iraq, the use of force alone may temporarily subside the outward manifestations of violence, but if the conflict has not been de-escalated so that the reasons behind the conflict can be addressed, the conflict is likely to resurface.

Even in World War II where America's goal was to rid the world of totalitarianism, the massively decisive defeat of the German Army did not address the root cause of the conflict. The emergence of groups such the "Werewolves" demonstrated the continued existence of conflict even though the kinetic phase of the war was over. Only after combat operations forcibly de-escalated the conflict and Allied reconstruction efforts provided an alternative solution did the people of Germany had a valid option to their dilemma. Only then did the

conflict end. Since the emergence of “People’s War,” the competitive strategy of “imposing our will on the enemy” only works if a nation’s political will allows a competitive strategy which entails genocide. Historically, the vast majority of conflicts and most likely the majority of future conflicts will only have the political staying power to obtain limited objectives.

A solution to this problem of competitive strategies would be to start with changing the Marine Corps doctrinal mindset from “the object of war is to impose our will on our enemy” to “the object of war is to de-escalate the conflict and reestablish the political process in order that political objectives are obtained.” Using this new mindset, the first priority would be to identify the environment of conflict we are entering into. Referencing figure (1), it can be almost assumed that for military intervention to occur, the conflict between political parties will have escalated to the point where each group is firmly established in a competition behavior pattern. The campaign to obtain the political objective then must describe how military forces are going to de-escalate the conflict so that politics can continue. In other words, in order to have a lasting resolution to the conflict, the opposition’s reaction to conflict must be changed from a competitive or avoidance strategy to a collaborative, accommodative or compromised one.

Sun Tzu said in regards to the “armed contest”, “in surrounding the enemy, leave him a way out.”<sup>29</sup> While Sun Tzu was talking about the “handling of troops”, the idea can be applied to the art of campaign design. In campaign design, military planners, while they may enter into a conflict that is matured into a combative competitive phase, must drive the campaign to a point where the opposition’s will is not suppressed in order to terminate combat operations, but to a point where the opposition’s will can seek out alternative ways to resolve the conflict. This in no way means that all campaigns must be purely conciliatory or that kinetic options should be avoided. As was shown in the American war with Vietnam during the Linebacker campaign, the



key to any coercive strategy is ensuring that your strategy makes the enemy feel that they are suffering unacceptably. This can obviously be done both kinetically and non-kinetically. The threshold of pain in relation to the opposing belligerent must be elevated to a point that they are willing to seek alternative options. The key to obtaining of political objectives is not in concluding operations when the opposing social group ceases violent acts. The key is to make your opponent look for alternatives to continued conflict, and then provide a suitable alternative which returns the conflict to the political arena.

Practically, how is this accomplished? This is initially achieved in the Mission Analysis portion of the Marine Corps Planning Process.<sup>30</sup> In this phase of planning, some of the key points of information to obtain is what is the root cause of the conflict and from this, how does the enemy commander define defeat. Neither of these issues is currently discussed in the planning process. The Commander's Intent then changes from a statement on how the commander defines victory to the commander's view on how his force will drive the enemy towards defeat and then give the enemy an alternative to continued hostilities. These alternatives will be more successful and acceptable if they can address the root cause of the conflict.

Then in Course of Action Development, the commander's battle staff uses the commander's intent to develop different courses of action (COAs) which are designed to increase the opponent's desire to terminate the conflict. As a review, this goal of de-escalating a conflict can be obtained by creating three different kinds of situations:

- a "hurting stalemate" in which both sides of the conflict feel that they are suffering unacceptable costs in a conflict that cannot be won;
- a situation defined by both parties desiring to end a conflict because of a recent or impending calamity, such as a war, which is a result of the conflict;
- a "enticing opportunity" which occurs when parties feel that there is something to be gained from collaborating with the other party.

Once the opposing group desires to end the conflict, the campaign can still fail to obtain the political goals if the belligerents have become too hostile and untrusting of each other. This is often the case where the above situations are created using forceful measures. Therefore, these COAs must include a robust Information Operations plan that uses conciliatory initiatives and develops subordinate goals which will set the stage for negotiation and third-party intervention. In other words, the desired endstate for each COA is that both political groups return to politics. To paraphrase Clausewitz, “war is a continuation of politics”, and in future war, the goal of a military campaign should be that “politics is a continuation of war.”<sup>31</sup>

MCDP 1 states:

The sole justification for the United States Marine Corps is to secure or protect national policy objectives by military force when peaceful means alone cannot. How the Marine Corps proposes to accomplish this mission is the product of our understanding of the nature and the theory of war and must be the guiding force behind our preparation for war. ***The challenge is to identify and adopt a concept of warfighting consistent with our understanding of the nature and theory of war*** and the realities of the modern battlefield.<sup>32</sup> (Emphasis added)

Our understanding of “the nature and theory of war” must also consist of an understanding of the nature of the conflict between human wills. Therefore, the key to future war is not in re-defining war, developing new strategies and tactics to account for new technology, or re-naming the “new” or “unconventional” emergent nature of war, it is in redefining the methods we use in obtaining our political objectives. In order to have a lasting resolution to the conflict, the opposition’s reaction to conflict must be changed from a competitive or avoidance strategy to a collaborative, accommodative or compromised one. This requires that military planners, while we may enter into a conflict that is matured into a combative competitive phase, must drive the campaign to a point where the opposition’s will is not suppressed in order to terminate combat operations but to a point where the opposition’s will

can seek out alternative ways to resolve the conflict. We will not win by “imposing our will on the enemy,” we will obtain our objectives if we can build a strategy which de-escalates the conflict in order that mutual objectives are obtained. Success is not the United States Marine Corps “winning” a competition. Victory is not our bloody combat boot on the will of the enemy. Success is defined as the Marine Corps shaping the environment to such a state so that our opponent desires to resolve conflict through political means. “War is a continuation of politics.”

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- <sup>3</sup> Definitions: Impose: To obtrude or force on another or others. Will: A desire, purpose, or determination, especially of one in authority. Therefore, “Impose our Will” is implied in this paper to mean, “To force others to do our desires.” URL:<<http://www.dictionary.com>>, accessed 12 April 2006
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- <sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 46.
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